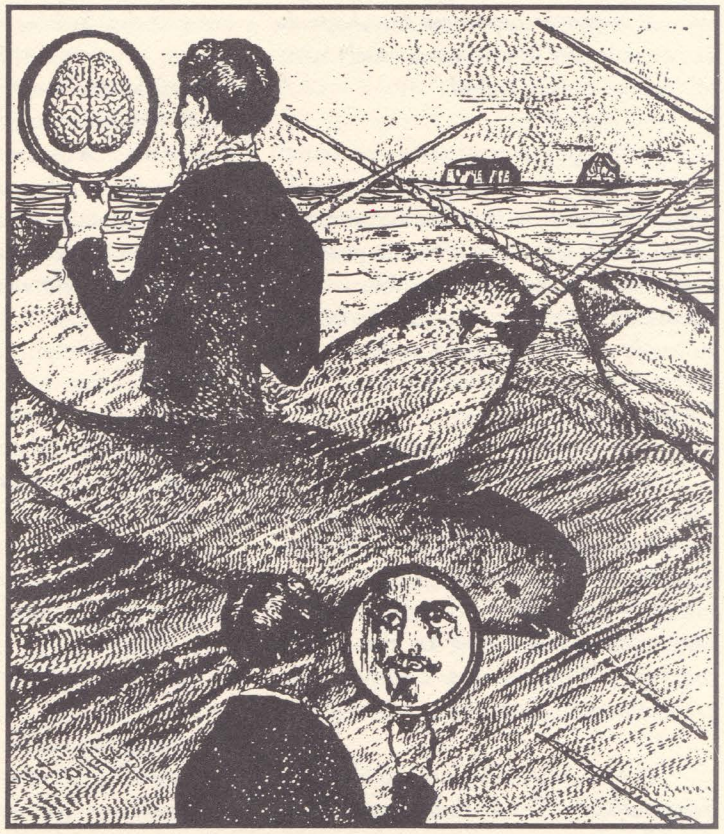
The Interspecies Newsletter

Summer 1992

Published Quarterly by Interspecies Communication Inc.

The Orca Project



In simplest terms, the Interspecies Communication orca project is a group of families and friends setting up a wilderness community in a forest at water's edge on one of the small islands located off Vancouver Island's north coast. The activities of our human group are primarily focused around daily interactions with that large black-and-white dolphin known as the orca. The orcas live just offshore from our camp.

We have produced the Orca Project nearly every summer for the past fifteen years. For ten of those years we have been conducting musical improvizations with the very vocal orcas through an electronic underwater sound system assembled inside the cabin of our project boat.

The Orca Project has always been multi-dimensional. Some observers believe it exemplifies a unique Gaian perspective to science. Author, and biologist/reformer Lyall Watson once wrote this about us: "It is a welcome antidote to the dispassionate approach of much modern biology. IC gets involved and we are all the wiser for it." Eric Utne of *The Utne Reader* wrote this after participating in the 1985 project: "It is a model for what modern science can and should be."

We prefer to call our research *interspecies jazz*. Or perhaps more precisely, communicating musical phrases and acoustic ideas with a whale seems another word for jazz but not necessarily another word for field biology. Call it scientific jazz, if you must. Our call-and-response jazz is based on real time reflections between species. Since the music we co-create with the orcas is wholly based on the ensemble approach to music making, and since this approach is an eminently democratic process, we might conclude that our project makes a strong political statement about relations between species.

If, as others assert, we are conducting scientific research, then it expands radically upon orthodox notions about the observer and the observed. It transforms both roles into that of participant. Since the whales are also participating, we might even make the case that the orcas must be conducting their own *cetacean* brand of scientific research at the same time. We mirror each other.

But there is nothing abstruse about what we do. If the musical interaction between species is indeed happening, you can usually hear it. A child can hear it. A non-musician can hear it. Someone listening to the human/orca dialogues on our cassette *Orcas Greatest Hits*, ten years after the fact, should be able to hear it. The whales seem to hear it, and get very excited trading riffs with us.

Perhaps ironically, other biologists rarely hear it. Whale scientists seem to hear it the least. One consequence of their skepticism is that in all our years of interspecies research, we have never been able to interest a whale biologist to come on board and observe, let alone document our work. That too may change this year.

Whatever the truth of the interaction, the clear discrepancies in perception sometimes cause the Orca Project to look controversial and even revolutionary. That may explain best why some whale scientists call us naive, bothersome, moot. Marshall McLuhan would have enjoyed the controversy because it seems more based in the *image* of what we do, and not on anything we actually do do. Carl Jung would also have enjoyed it. When the anima gets liberated from the bottle, new realities start to gnaw on the old.

The *Whole earth Catalog* recently wrote a review of Interspecies Communication Inc that disagreed with both Lyall

Printed in soy-based ink on unbleached, 100% post-consumer stock

Watson and Eric Utne:

"You can't call this pseudoscience. IC doesn't claim that this is any sort of science at all. The idea, rather, is to interact with other species in whatever way – scientific, artistic, shamanic – seems most appropriate to the situation. This is certainly a broader definition of communication than most researchers would accept. But the approach gives the animals a greater opportunity to shape the exchange to their liking than a purely scientific approach would allow."

Although our participatory research with orcas is construed to be controversial, to us it seems like common sense. After all, these orcas do possess a brain and acoustic sensibilities more advanced than our own. They have a lot to teach us. We have a lot to learn.

Mirrors

Perhaps it would be cogent to compare the Orca project to another cetacean program. Project Delphis is now underway at Sea Life Park in Hawaii–instigated to test dolphin intelligence. According to the project brochure, Delphis was begun on an environmental premise.

"If the mental abilities of dolphins could be scientifically characterized, then humans, through their deeper understanding would be more likely to appreciate and respect them–and fight harder to protect them."

Evidently, in the hundred and fifty years since Darwin, biologists have agreed that just two species besides humans – chimps and orangutans – possess self awareness.

"Self awareness is one of those classic provinces, like language, where man (sic) thought he was alone on the planet. Most animals that look at their reflection in the mirror, will mistake the image for another animal. Studies investigating self-awareness in chimps and orangutans first anesthetize the animal and then mark a spot that would only be visible when the animal looks in a mirror. The animal is considered self-aware if it reaches to touch the mark on itself rather than the one displayed in the mirror."

Project Delphis figured out a way to eliminate the drugs, went ahead and marked the sides of some captive dolphins, and then videotaped one animal examining those telltale marks in a mirror. The conclusion:

"this is the first time such self awareness has been demonstrated in a non-ape."

And then this rationale:

"if dolphins are proven self-aware the public will be more likely to support programs to save them. This is a perfect scientific study for the conservation effort, because people are more likely to empathize with animals that show human characteristics."

A Mega-Dose

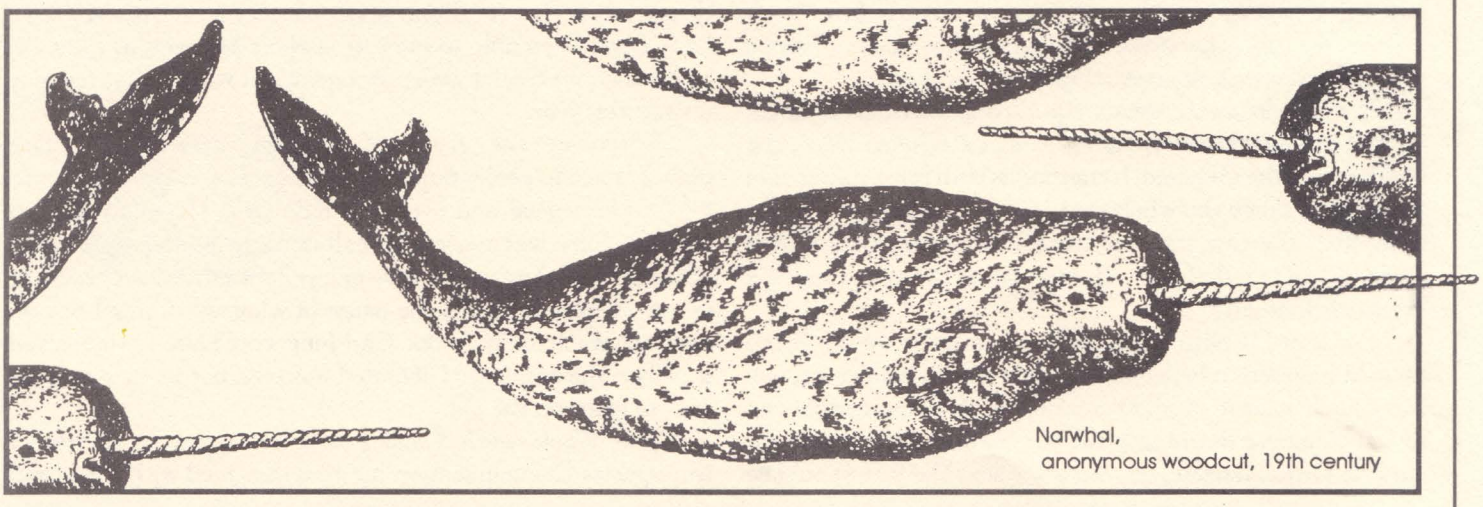
As the example of Project Delphis plainly suggests, the interface between human beings and wild animals (including captive dolphins) is currently in dire need of a mega-dose of contemplative and creative balance. Unfortunately, experiments like Project Delphis may be the very best that modern science in cahoots with the multi-million dollar oceanarium dolphin slave trade are able to muster.

What seems most tragic to this observer is that the researchers may actually be correct when they presume that their own seal of approval somehow sets the ground rules by which the society at large (or at least the government) treats animals. That seal of approval clearly states that we must cage, drug, mark, isolate, and interrogate animals to know something akin to knowing that the sky is blue.

Common Ground

That harsh judgement, more than any other factor, makes it seem critical that IC continue to conduct its own bastard brand of under-funded research. The Orca Project strives to alter society's obfuscation of respectfulness by seeking the wild place where music meets ecology, the place where both, in turn, meet the whales.

We utilize music, transmitted underwater, to create improvizatory

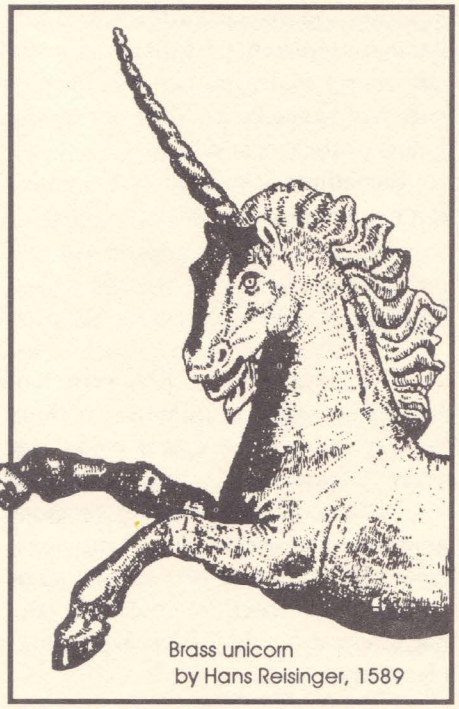


Narwhal,
anonymous woodcut, 19th century

frequency range quite accessible to a human listener. Orca vocalizations have been described as a knife-edged cross between jazz saxophone and humpback whale. The orcas seem to be talking to one another in two distinct modes: the frequency modulated "whistle" and the pulsed click train.

To translate: frequency modulation is a fancy word for melody. A pulsed click train is echolocation, meaning that the whales employ sonar to make three-dimensional "pictures" out of echoes. On another level, we might refer to echolocation as a kind of holophonic rhythm that not only keeps good time, but simultaneously produces crisp images. Musicians, take note.

Whatever the limits may be of ever "proving" that orca vocalizations are a language, and whatever the barriers of proposing our own music-making experiments as a miner of cetacean self-awareness, frequency modulation and echolocation obviously offer much common ground for an improvizing human musician. Our community has always included several musicians, one of whom (yours truly) has been interacting with these same orca pods for nearly fifteen years. For this year's Orca Project, we are also joined by clarinetist and recording artist, Gene Groeschel, who has similarly been exploring a musical common ground with birds. His cassette, *Hawk Eyes Dreaming*, is an exemplar of the form.



Brass unicorn
by Hans Reisinger, 1589

Our underwater sound system certainly enhances the interface. It effectively turns any boat into a recording studio, and thus permits both a twenty-four monitoring of the underwater environment as well as a real time transmission and reception of sound and music across the human/orca interface.

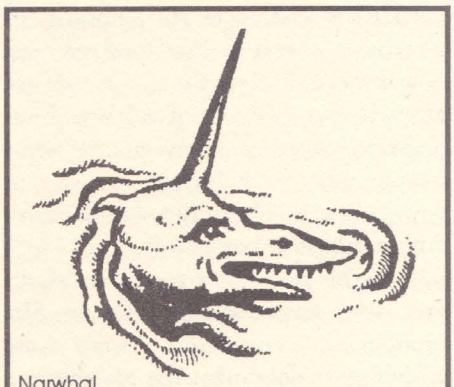
We moor our boat/recording studio in a small cove for a few weeks, transmit live music into the water, and then wait for the whales to come to us. Sooner or later, they always seem to do so.

The Floating Interstate

Tragically, over the years the orcas' environment has gone through some very drastic changes. What was once a watery wilderness, is now a major shipping channel, a kind of floating interstate connecting Alaska to the lower forty-eight States. Freighters, tankers, cruise ships, and as many as thousand fishing boats—most of them with their engines running— may be heard, both day and night, within a few miles of our own recording platform.

Moreover, what was once the domain of a few researchers, including ourselves, is now the center of a major whale-watching business. As many as five large tour boats tag behind the whale pods all day every day. The forested shoreline is grievously wounded by the human social disease called logging. Even Robson Bight, the world famous "home" of the whales, has been clearcut to within a few hundred yards of the shoreline. It gives the Bight the look and feel of a stage-set wilderness. It also adds much mud to the once pristine waters, destroying the salmon upon which the orcas live.

As early as 1987, we started noticing that the whales were far more aloof than they had been even a few years previously. They were also far more quiet among themselves, which we presumed to be a function of the excessive noise



Narwhal
by Olaus Magnus, 1539

pollution in the Straits. Because our own project has always been acoustically focused, it soon became veritably impossible to make recordings without boat engines throbbing in the background, even in the middle of the night. By 1989 the whales were visiting us far less often than they once did. They also seemed to be spending far more time away from the Straits.

It was for all these reasons that we stopped doing the Orca Project in 1990. No matter that our project was set up so that the whales had to swim to us if *they* were interested in interacting. No matter that even at our loudest, the live music we created was never transmitted louder than a small outboard motor. Still, we did not want to be construed as part of the problem; either by the business-like tour leaders pro-tecting their turf, or by the whales losing theirs.

The Cutting Edge?

The Orca Project has always garnered a lot of attention from both the media as well as from whale lovers all over the world. Although we haven't done the project for two years, it still precipitates more letters from members, colleagues, and fans then just about anything else we do. The point I make is that the Orca Project seems to genuinely inspire many, many people. It kindles and upholds a powerful dreaming for interspecies communication between humans and whales.

Whether the reality of our own interspecies relationship with those

particular whales is still vibrant, or whether it is instead just a fond memory, now draws us back to the Straits this July after a two year hiatus. We have gathered together many of the same people who participated in our last voyage. We shall be onsite with the orcas during the latter half of July.

As this newsletter goes to press, we are also negotiating with a film production company. They are proposing to document the project for a prime-time Japanese TV show that focuses on presenting the cutting edge of communication art and technology.

Whether the film makers decide to join us or not, we soon sail north, harboring no undue expectations about the whale's own interest in helping us produce all those eminently wonderful images of guitar players plucking away from the bow of our boat while being circled by six-foot tall dorsal fins, or of little children kayaking while whales breach, spyhop, and tail-slap in the midst of their whoops of delight. Only time will tell if we are able to engage the whales as we once did

That tenuous conclusion sometimes makes me wonder. What might our project demonstrate about the cutting edge of anything? What if the film makers join us, and we all arrive to find the forests stripped bare of trees, and the resident whales once again forced to flee the straits for their own survival?

Then again, it seems a very positive sign that the film team seems to prefer our own highly speculative venture over the likes of Project Delphis where every single part of the equation, including the environment, the research, the researchers, the dolphins, and even the definition of self-awareness, are all utterly controlled.

We don't control much of anything. In terms of interacting with whales, we consider it a virtue. In terms of a vastly diminished wilderness environment, it remains our greatest frustration.

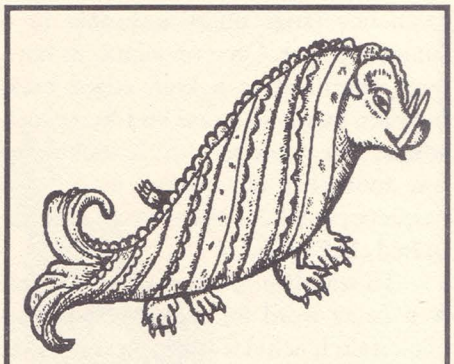
The Arctic Project

Did we start working with beluga whales because they live in the high Arctic where one might still dream of finding unpolluted environments full of untrammeled animals existing free from human harassment? Unfortunately, that image is also a myth. Every single place in the Arctic I have ever worked with cetaceans, I have also encountered native people overhunting animals, scientists radio-tagging them in the so called pursuit of knowledge, and just about everybody getting very upset that we (or anybody else for that matter) would actually propose to communicate with animals.

The beluga whales are still a mystery to me. If the orcas sound musical – like Charley Parker blowing his saxophone underwater – then the belugas sound like a high-pitched cocktail party where too many voices speak at once, making it impossible to pick out any single conversation. Whereas the orcas are being loved to death and have turned aloof because of it, the belugas seem to be friendly to my simple musical incursions despite the ongoing killing and harassment. I read their entreaties as a sign of hope and compassion.

Regular readers of this newsletter should be well aware by now of my aspiration to write and promote a new kind of documentary nature film loosely based on IC's ongoing work in the Arctic. My own entry into this film genre has the working title of *Talking to Beluga*. I describe it as a journey into irony, an exploration of lost and emergent interspecies relationships; what author, Barry Lopez once drily called "imagination and desire in a northern landscape."

If the orca project is an expression of a community of artists exploring the limits of music making with another species; then the Arctic Project has always been more about the way that outside observers relate to me,



Walrus, by Olaus Magnus, 1539

personally, in my role as interspecies communicator. Playing an innocuous little wooden drum (thump-thump-thump) out in the water with beluga whales or narwhals, sometimes causes other humans to imbue my actions with a power and an intentionality far beyond anything I might conjure on my own.

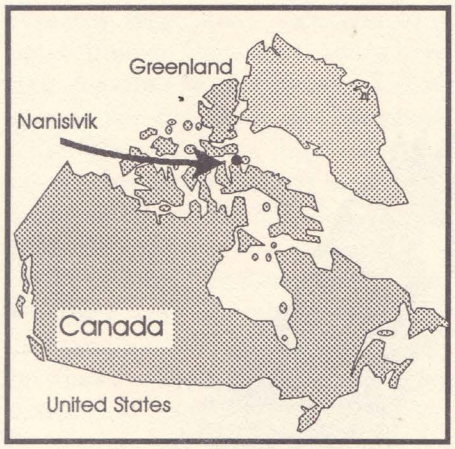
Without meaning to sound grandiose about it, my music making seems a kind of shamanic catalyst that draws out deeply entrenched values that other people hold about animal awareness. Without ever planning for it to have that effect , the Arctic Project has long since developed into a thorough documentation of this trickster image and its sometimes heated side effects.

The Arctic Project thus differs from the orca project not only by species, place, and instrumentation, but also by objective and perception. It is as much drama as research. I feel like a jester performing a distinctly interspecies version of Comedia d'el Arte out on the theatre of the icepack.

Sometimes risky business. Keeps this post modern man on his toes.

August 1992

My colleague in the 1992 version of this ongoing project is film maker, **Doug Nelson**, whose most recent credit is a series of national public service announcements for the UN environmental conference in Rio. Doug and I started shooting footage last summer at Cunningham Inlet located near the magnetic north pole. This year we travel a bit further east.



The purpose of this year's Arctic Project is to continue shooting footage, and hopefully to return home with enough material to piece together a pilot film to help us drum up financial support to shoot the next phase of the project. Doug plans to focus his cameras on the Inuit people in their summer camps.

Doug flies into Nanisivik located on the northern tip of Baffin Island (see map) on the last week of July. From there, he'll join an Inuit family and travel across Barrow Strait by boat to a walrus hunting camp located on the south coast of rugged Devon Island. He'll return to Nanisivik two weeks later, at which point I will have completed the Orca Project and will join him. The two of us will travel south to spend a week at an Inuit fish camp. If all goes well, we plan to drum and film in (and under) the pack ice with beluga whales and narwhals. During the last week of our stay, we travel further south, and then backpack up onto the plateau of Baffin Island, into a wild area known for its animal life. Depending on sea and weather conditions, we may bring along the IC underwater sound system, to record and interact with the whales. Otherwise I will play a water-floating drum made of wood.

Doug has been deeply touched by the native people, and is now drawn to fully document the Inuit struggling to retain their ancient way of life. I am drawn to write about that struggle, especially its effects on human animal relations.

As the illustrations in this newsletter are meant to suggest, I am equally drawn to meet the narwhals. Narwhals possess a long curlicue tooth that sometimes grows as long as nine feet. It looks much like the mythical unicorn horn. Whereas almost all males sprout a "horn/tooth", it is only the rare female that grows one. Occasionally, an animal may even sprout two elongated teeth. The tooth always spirals in the counter-clockwise direction. Besides the "horn/tooth", the narwhal has no other teeth. As far as the utility of this bizarre tooth, the males have been observed sparring with them during courtship rituals.

Narwhals are gregarious animals who usually swim in small pods of up to twenty animals. Upon occasion, as many as 2000 animals have been observed swimming together. Unlike the beluga whales that inhabit the areas near shore, narwhals are a deep-water species. Just like the beluga whale, they are prone to make all sorts of noises while swimming together.

A Personal Plea

New Options *published by Mark Satin, was one of the most influential political newsletters of our time. About two years ago, Satin devoted an entire issue making a public appeal to his readers for more support. He was tired of doing a newsletter that received so much praise, so many honors, but which also caused him to live below the poverty level and endure 80 hour work weeks. He told his devoted readers that he'd stick it out for just one more year unless subscriptions or donations improved to a certain minimal level. During that year his readers responded by sending in a substantial 80% of the amount he asked for. But it wasn't enough, so Satin stuck to his original ultimatum. He stopped doing the newsletter; signing off the last issue by declaring that he wanted to learn something that would help him lead a normal life. He's evidently now in law school.*

The president of a rather large environmental organization recently wrote to me heaping lavish praise on the Interspecies Newsletter. He spoke of its content—the fact that it always surprised him—and the way that our themes continually made him rethink his own environmental work in refreshing ways. Then he confessed that he almost never reads his own slickly produced newsletter because it is written "for sixth grade level".

I have to confess that I rarely read his newsletter either, although I must admit that is where I got the info about Project Delphis. Nor in fact do I read 90% of the newsletters that glut my mailbox through journal exchanges. So many pieces of well-meaning and high-minded junk mail makes me worry about the misplaced intentions of too many organizations trying to save nature but who spend quite lavish amounts of membership money to produce newsletters no one really reads.

Maybe that's not the point. My friend's letter implies that the primary function of all these sixth-grade level newsletters is to inform the membership (through physical proximity and slickness rather than through literary content) that the organization is both professional and functional.

But speaking for the trees, it seems too bad that all these organizations couldn't simply send out a well-designed one page letter or brochure twice a year giving concise descriptions of their corporate projects, and including phone numbers of resource people to call for more info. These same letters could also reveal the renewal status of each member, and thus avoid the mailing of more renewal messages than any of us really need to endure.

The unbounded success of my friend's own membership organization suggests that a sixth grade format may work better than anything else to keep a membership growing and active. But is the opposite also true? Is a newsletter possessed of some substance (and which excludes fundraising pleas and silly newsiness) potentially harmful to an organization's bottom line?

Indeed, the Interspecies Newsletter

varies drastically from the non-profit standard. We usually focus on archetypal issues that pertain to the most general interpretation of interspecies communication. We discuss the nuances of a modern people learning to recognize a sacred ecology by talking to the animals, of the ancient people who have largely been forced to abandon that same sacred ecology, and of the future generations who will primarily benefit if we can all figure out how to remember it.

IC is now suffering through hard times. I personally do not know how to to solve the problem other than to communicate it to all the recipients of this newsletter. I will do my best to avoid sixth grade tactics.

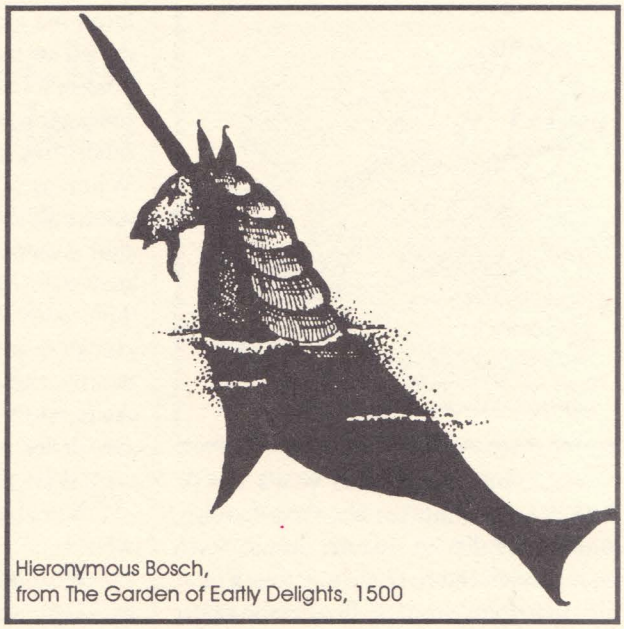
We desperately need some new sponsors; or perhaps a renewal of interest from the old sponsors who have gone off to other tax-deductible hunting grounds. It is either that, or a reduction in activities. The newsletter is one of our more costly and time-consuming activities. I am very sad to report that it heads the list of things to give up. If this one-time plea for money succeeds, I promise to continue publishing. If it fails, the newsletter is doomed.

The Interspecies Newsletter started twelve years ago to provide a vehicle for networking the projects of this organization. Over several years of continuous publishing, it has developed into a springboard for new ecological and aesthetic ideas. In just that spirit, we send out gratis, a hundred copies each issue to environmentalists, publishers, scientists, spiritual leaders, artists, etc .

The Interspecies Newsletter has never advertised for new readers, mostly because we regard it to be the networking medium for our members and not as a business unto itself. It is only one aspect of a non-profit involved in several other self-supporting activities. To our advantage, that means we need far less money to make the Interspecies Newsletter work than Mark Satin needed to make *New Options* work. However, we definitely need more than we now have on hand.

I admit to a personal attachment to the newsletter. As I write, I have two books published in five languages apiece, two more books in the works, and six or eight magazine stories published each year. The newsletter has played a crucial role in helping me develop all these interspecies ideas into written form.

At this point in time, just about everything first published in the newsletter eventually gets picked up by some major magazine or book anthology. For instance, look for the Spring issue's piece about Japanese' changing values about dolphins in an upcoming issue of *E* magazine. The winter issue's piece about washing oil-soaked birds has set the theme for the fall issue of *Orion* magazine. And Last Fall's piece about our 1991 Arctic Project recently turned up as a feature in the June issue of *NewAge*.



Hieronymous Bosch,
from The Garden of Earthly Delights, 1500

The field projects have always been this organization's lifeblood. I optimistically suspect that our projects will always find funding. Such non-traditional research genuinely intrigues many people who possess the means to support our activities. That is the main reason I can envision IC functioning without a quarterly newsletter.

On the other hand, ending the newsletter means far less time and energy devoted to sustaining IC as a membership organization. It would permit me more time to fundraise for the projects. It would permit me more time to figure out how to actually earn a living as a fulltime writer.

Tough times for IC may be a direct result of tight money caused by the recession. Most of the other non-profit administrators I've spoken to recently seem also to be reeling from a paucity of available funds. Then again, it would be smug of me to declare that IC's own tough times are nothing but a function of the recession. Our dwindling membership may also be trying to tell us something quite different: that the work of IC is no longer quite as pertinent as it was even a few years ago.

Here's how our finances work. All of the projects we do, and a significant percentage of salaries we pay, are donated by a few major sponsors. These are primarily wealthy individuals who obviously respond to our work, and who grant us general support. However, one problem I am always coping with is that some of the sponsors can not pledge more than one year at a time. This means we never feel secure about what January will bring until January arrives.

Our field projects remain on track meaning that our few funding angels are still with us. That is why this summer's field projects are developing right on schedule.

In all our years, IC has never received a grant from an establishment foundation. This sometimes causes me to make the unfunny joke that if I need to fill out an application form, it means that the grant proposal I write has already been rejected.

Certain of our field projects are, however, subsidized by various media production companies who come on board wishing to document some aspect of the projects. The Smithsonian, all the

American TV networks, and even the National Endowment for the Arts have indirectly funded us this way.

Memberships are another matter. Members are those people who send us less than $100 a year. For ten years we have struck a quasi-miraculous balance between newsletter and office expenses on one side of the ledger, and membership donations on the other. We never aspired (nor even hoped) to *make* money from memberships, simply because that would demand an inflated organizational infrastructure no one here wanted to manage. We just wanted to break even.

It is this break-even aspect of the newsletter vis-a-vis members that has always kept this reporter buoyant and engaged enough to sit down for a week or more each quarter to channel all the news that passes through me in my role as freelance Gaian enzyme.

But now memberships are declining. More precisely, most of our old members keep renewing faithfully, and we thank you for your loyalty. But we seem to be getting far fewer new members than we used to. This is occurring despite the vastly increased number of newsletter queries we receive. These are mostly prompted by the blurbs located at the bottom of all the magazine stories that are reprinted from our newsletter stories. We dutifully answer all of these queries. Our correspondents get something for free. We pay for it in money and in time.

But very few of these correspondents end up joining the organization. My hunch is that the newsletter informs them that we are neither esoteric, environmental, scientific, political, high tech, or academic. If we sometimes seem to be all of the above, then also suggests that we are none of the above. Nor have ever had any interest whatsoever in running the dolphin fan club.

The result is a membership organization that does not pay its administrator a dependable salary. And yet it now demands far more time to operate.

This conclusion may also explain why the sixth grade approach to networking succeeds so well. It does not arouse people. It copies a George Bush style of professionalism that stands for little else but succeeding. The sixth grade approach succeeds because it permits no closer examination of one's true heart.

We have all been raised to believe that more consumption somehow equals more success. It generates the circular success story exemplified by far too many environmental nonprofits who undertake shrill membership drives in order to raise more funds, which then necessitates more employees which demands still more membership funds, around and around and around. The center can not hold. And running a membership organization becomes an exercise in eating one's own tail.

Financially, IC is not succeeding despite very different symptoms that give the same impression that we must be a huge success. But this is the first year in ten that I have not always been able to pay myself for running this organization. If volunteerism is my future, then it demands consolidation.

The newsletter has never had a circulation larger than 1000. This month we'll be sending out about five hundred pieces. Quite honestly, with all the folding and collating to do, that number suits me just fine. We also send out fifty newsletters to people who check the little box on the last page pleading poverty. We always liked offering this policy, because it keeps our ideas classless. Unfortunately, times change. If you find an F or a P on your mailing label, this may be your last issue. If you get another one this fall, give a nod in our direction. It means that someone has stepped forward to answer our prayers.

So how much money am I talking about? We need at least ten thousand dollars per year beyond what our angels *already* send us. I would would feel far more secure with fifteen thousand dollars more than we have received during each of the last three years. We need that amount per year, pledged *for three or more years*.

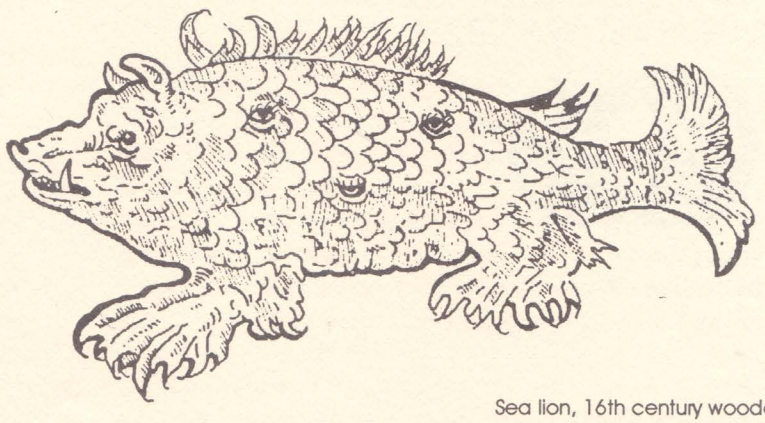
I suppose this could ostensibly translate into 400 more members at $25 apiece, although so many more members would necessitate another hired hand which causes a catch-22 situation.

Far more realistic, we need ten to fifteen new sponsors willing to pledge $1000 a year. Two or three people at $5000; one or two at $10,000.

If we fail, then starting next winter we will cut the newsletter to an occasional, quasi-newsletter. If that doesn't work...and if you see me bagging groceries at the local supermarket, make a sound like a whale and I'll do my best to respond appropriately.

Thank you for reading to the end.
All donations are tax deductible.

—Jim Nollman



Sea lion, 16th century woodcut